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ABSTRACT

A group of adult learners in Tennessee who were in various stages of learning to read were interviewed in order to determine their assumptions concerning the acquisition of literacy skills. The focus of the interviews was on the students' motives for wanting to learn how to read and write, their concepts about the nature of the learning process, and their expectations about the role of the teacher and the learner in the process. This paper includes 25 excerpts from the interviews. Among the topics covered in the excerpts are being misunderstood, questioning the motives of literacy workers, developing self-understanding, stimulating a desire to read for pleasure and information, being treated disrespectfully, developing a reciprocal teacher-learner relationship, helping learners to build a concept of what a good reader does, using computer-assisted instruction, accepting learners as fellow human beings, providing immediate success with print, covering up inadequacies, accommodating anxieties in illiterate persons, helping learners reflect critically upon the reasons for their present situation, not being understood, becoming literate for personal insight, meeting learner needs for personal attention and empathy, overcoming anxieties about joining literacy classes, discovering what is important to learners, and understanding the value of education and the roots of illiteracy. (MN)

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ON BECOMING LITERATE: PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Presents the reader with excerpts drawn from interviews with adults who were enrolled in basic literacy programs. The excerpts are expected to stimulate reflection and evaluation of the roles and characterizations of teachers who want to work with the illiterate adult.

On Becoming Literate: Personal Perspectives

The debate goes on and on over two basic questions in the field of adult literacy instruction: Why are so many adult education programs plagued by poor records of achievement? And, why do so many programs often have high attrition rates?

One can look at a variety of phenomena that may have a bearing on the problem--administrative structures, learning sites, scheduling conflicts. One explanation however, warrants special attention. At the heart of the problem, as Levine (1983) has pointed out, lies a flaw in the conceptual framework in which literacy has been studied. Much of the research has been done by reading specialists and psychologists intent on answering one question: how literacy should be taught. In contrast, questions concerning whether educational programs match the common hopes, dreams, expectations and anxieties of the adult learner have hardly been raised. Consequently, much of the instruction in literacy education is not fully grounded in the central concerns of the adult.

Recently I interviewed adult learners in Tennessee who were in various stages of learning to read. My purpose was to identify some of the assumptions they held about acquiring literacy skills. I was especially interested in discovering their motives for wanting to learn how to read and write, their concepts about the nature of the learning process and their expectation about the teacher's role and the learner's role in the process.

I assumed that this knowledge would help literacy educators speak to the central concerns of their students. In addition, I felt that it would help literacy educators anticipate when particular programs might be unrealistic in the context of their students hopes and expectations.

This paper presents the reader with some of the excerpts drawn from the interviews and conversations with the adults in the study. I have intentionally avoided analysis, integration and conclusions in favor of letting the adults speak for themselves. Thus, the paper has not been conceived of in a traditional way. Instead, it is a compendium of insights and reflections aimed at helping literacy educators understand what it is like to be unable to read and write.

Reading this paper is expected to stimulate reflection and evaluation of the roles and characteristics of teachers who want to work with the illiterate adult. To this end, the personal perspectives should prove an invaluable resource to teachers, administrators and university personnel connected with literacy education.

On Being Misunderstood: I think - attitude. Attitudes are so important. I remember when I was in school and me and my ole man was having it out that morning and I didn't get my car and got to storming in slamming things around. A lot of teachers nowadays get to the stage where they don't give a shit. I've had them tell me you're going to the next grade, just get out of my face. Because I was a bad child they didn't try to find out why I was a bad child. They just didn't try to work with me or nothing.

On High Drop out Rates in Adult Literacy Programs: They may be doing it for somebody other than themselves and they decide that it's no use because they don't have the drive. You know, they're not doing it for themselves.

On Questioning the Motives of Literacy Workers: If you're a prisoner in a prison they would want to know your motive for wanting to come out here and wanting to teach them. And then There's this you probably run into a lot of bitterness... A lot of people in prison are bitter. And out of this bitterness. . . Like you said you had a student from New York City from the streets, right? And a well educated, wealthy young lady from Vanderbilt teaching her and she probably had resentment. . you know, like this girl, what's her idea? She's got everything. What's she doing out here? Playing a role? Is she doing me some kind of favor?

On Reciprocity in the Teacher-Learner Relationship: I think the teacher should be more positive and be more like the servant instead of the master.

That would cause students to say, she's serving me so I'm going to try and do better. Instead of being a loudmouth. No one wants to be a slave of any kind. That's why I think he/she should be more positive and more like a servant.

On Self-Understanding: I thank you and I thank God that anybody who wants to learn can learn.

On Stimulating a Desire to Read for Pleasure and Information: Yes, my deal is I felt good once I left because I never even tried to read the paper, you know. When she first started to come she would bring clippings and stuff like that. Something important that happened the day before. I would read it and get me with reading from the paper. That made me want to go back the next day and get the paper and read. Before then I could see the paper and somebody read it and because they had it on TV I didn't care nothing about the paper, you know. But after I started reading with her, the paper and certain books, that made me want to pick up a book and read it. Then I saw something I was missing because I was not trying to read it. So that helped me out a whole lot.

On the Value of Computer-BasedInstruction: Now, I like to learn how to spell words. But I'd just as soon go back to the theory that the computers can't care nothing about you.

On Being Treated Disrespectfully: I slapped a teacher one time. She slapped me. If she'd never laid her hands on me I wouldn't have, you know. I think that the teacher's respect is very important. If she gives it, she is going to get it.

On Helping the Learner Build a Concept of what a Good Reader does: Well, Chris she would ask me when I read over something she would ask me what I remember when I read and then I would turn the paper up side down and I would try to relate back to her what I had read without looking back at the paper and see if I could remember what I had already gone over. And I think that help alots too cause see you find out that you have to remember what you read, if you don't remember what you read you can read it all day long and it isn't going to do you no good.

On What Went Wrong: You know, when I was going to school, my grades were... I just got by. I just passed by some miracle from one grade to the other. Yet, at times there'd be certain subjects that I would get into a school and I'd pass at the top of the class. Otherwise, I didn't study. I had no one to motivate me and I had no one to push me, no one to discipline me and it was...it seemed femine to study. I was... when the teacher was reading a classical book.... I'd rather slip out the window and go play or something like that. And so I just got by. I was probably the lowest one in the entire class. I remember one time when I went to a Technical School in California... there was 25 students and I studied electricity, refrigerator engineering and marine engineering and junior engineering and I was at the top of the class. My worse grade was 94. All other grades were 100 and so I wasn't so dumb when I was a kid but I just didn't study. I had no one to motivate me, to push me, to discipline me.

On Accepting the Learner as a Fellow Human Being: Just don't have students in your class to learn but take an interest in what the problems are and what they're interested in learning. What you can do to make things better for them and get theminterested in things they want to do. Help them to understand what they are doing and to like it because some teachers will say if you don't want to do this I don't care if you are in my class. For a lot of people they don't want to hear this. They are fighting back and saying I don't understand this and I don't want to do this. What they are really asking for is in other words please help me, but I don't know how to ask you for it. Take an interest in them and show them what to do. Put out 100% to make them interested and help them to become better readers. And help you better learn how to teach other children and it can make both parties feel more accomplished and besides learning the reading the other subjects can be respected both ways. I respect the teacher for she helped me do this and she helped me do that. I respect the students for giving me a chance to show this person that I am interested and that I care for this person not only because he is a student but because he is a person. The problems I think will be solved both ways.

On Providing Immediate Success with Print: He was reading us a good book a while ago. I loved that. We were all like this the whole time he was reading. I wouldn't have dared picked up that book and read it to myself.

On Covering Up Inadequacies: Don't want to be made fun of. I remember a time when I couldn't do it and Like I'd say "Yeah, yeah, it's did" and you know and I ain't did nothing but it's because I'm ashamed. I don't want to say "I don't know". I don't want to ask this man here and you put him over here because I don't want you all to think that I'm dumb. It's just like some kind of image that they instilled or you done seen or projected I don't need no help, I'm this, I'm that and really you don't know head from tail and then again you want to project the I know it all.

On Allowing the Learner to Reflect his Own Experiences: With my deal what I like is when she first come in she lectured me about my school days when I were going to school back years ago. She asked me about some of the things I like to do when I was going to school and what kinda subjects I would like to take up and what games I like to play and all that you know. I liked basketball and she told me to write an anti autobo. . . on that and I did and what I have given her she went home or wherever. Then when she come back she had one wrote out of the saying what she thought it should have been like, you know. I read it and it was almost perfect of what I had and almost exactly what I did and so we read that for about three days just going over and over it and I really like that. I like her bringing certain things for me to read and then she would ask me the things that I like and I would tell her and would go home and write it and bring it back and me and her read it. She let me read it and what I don't know she write that and tell me the words.

On the Nature of Exploitation: I look at it. . in a way it's some teachers' fault and my fault. I just can't put the whole blame on the teachers cause I played a very important part in that. Like when I was a junior in high school, I am one of the ones that made it through junior high and half way through high school on my ability to play football. The principal seen, the coach seen, the teachers seen...here's a man here. . we've got a chance at the state championship. We ain't going to hold him. We're going to push him right on through but when it comes to grabbing the basics when it wasn't enough.. they put my foot down and probably should have said "No football". It was all football and no work and I kind of blame the teachers for that. I kind of blame myself too but then again when you. .. you kind of get that big head when you're the star running back, you know. See you give me these awards and then the bastard's runnin on the team and scoring the most touchdowns. That was all and good back then but now as I progress and mature I look back over it and heh... they wasn't helping me at all.

On Accommodating Anxieties in Illiterates: When I'd go down I would be nervous but my teacher would sit down with me and be patience with me and let me do it at my own speed and the way I wanted to do it. And that helped me quite a bit.

In Helping Learners Critically Reflect on the Reasons for Their Present Situation: My teacher brought one book that I had never asked for but the rest of them were my choice and the reason she brought that it was similar to the situation that I am in, how people got in trouble and why they got in trouble and what the prison system was doing to help the people. And I remember the story well because I got into it and I really wanted to read it and it showed me alot of people come in these place and 9 out of 10 times people just want to lock him up and keep them until they do their time and let them out. They do not rehabilitate these people. It told about a group they had where they would put these people and they would give them an education find out what is wrong because 9 out of 10 times they were not criminals they just had problems that they didn't know how to deal with and they took it out by doing some kinda crimes. And I liked her. She seems to know from what I read how to make a mixture out of the stories and put them together and ask me do you remember these. I get to reading them and I was getting to where I can tell that I have read before which book it was out of and the name of the author of the book. I am coming on.

On Not Being Understood: I was mostly the type of kid that was hard-headed and didn't like alot of things and alot of times a teacher would give us a book or subject to do and I didn't like it and she would say "Well if you don't like this subject the best thing I can tell you to do is just close the books and get out of class". Trying to get me to stay down was the wrong approach. I would shut my book and if she said throw it on the floor I would throw it on the floor. But these teachers here they don't say if you don't like it, that's tough. They say if you don't like this one we'll get another one.

On Literacy for Personal Insight: In my case, we talked about this: What makes you angry? What makes you mad, upset or not like people or what is it that makes you mad about yourself. We talked about it and I would explain it to her and she would explain to me how she felt. I would get to feeling better and say,"Hey, I shouldn't be angry about this or downgrade myself cause she lives out in the pretty world with thousands of people. She has the same feeling. So why be ashames to try to deal with them for the rest of your life." They can also show you this by just talking to you.

On the Need for Personal Attention: I wasn't expecting it myself, I didn't know exactly how it was going to be. When I first started coming down here that I was just going to have a book sitting over there reading it and I had to try to figure out what it was myself, you know. When they said one-on-one...here me and my teacher right here and what I didn't know she was right there to tell me and not only to tell me to explain to me what it meant and when I got done reading she would ask me do I understand..

On the Need for Empathy: I have noticed in alot of places teachers will say, Hey, I am the teacher you are to listen. And do the work I give you. Bring it up to me and if I tell you it isn't right, you can do it again. Don't go to your class rooms with the hey, I am the teacher. I am the boss and I am the one you should listen to. Use something that I have learned to use in this prison program. Put yourself in that person's shoes. See how you would feel if he comes in everyday and says,"Hey, I am the boss listen to me and we are going to do it this way. If you don't like it that way then I am sorry." If you don't know other ways to teach this person, then find out your views. Learn to work on his views and work on your views and put them both across at the same time and accomplish more. Put your self as a football team. He is the receiver and you be a quarterback. He is not going to catch that ball unless he knows you are playing. He is not going to know that you are playing unless he understands what you tell him. If he can't understand it, you might as well take the play back and forget it. Find out his views, understand him and help him to understand you and you got it.

On Anxieties About Joining Literacy Classes: Yes that is true.. It has taught me more than just how to read. It has taught me to respect the teacher because just bringing books in that she wants us to read, which is something that could be easier for her, she bring us what we want, what I want. I asked her why she took the time to get this book she said she felt if I weren't interested enough in the books she brought that I wouldn't read it. The more interested you are in the book the better you are going to do in it. I would like to get the materials that you do like and that surprised me and another thing that surprised me is the way that these teachers like to come here to teach people. It seems that there are hardly people in the free world that wants to come into a prison with inmates and teach them. They have doubts about the people and fears about the people and you have slight little fears about how am I going to deal with this person. How are we going to communicate and they show you when they come in that they are not looking at you as a con or inmate but are looking at you like other people and you look at them as other people.

On Discovering What is Important to the Learner: Basically it all comes back to everyone needs help. I like to ask you first how did you become teachers. Someone will have to take an interest in you. Find out what you wanted to be. What subjects you wanted to teach. They heard your views on this subject and they gave you the materials that you liked best. You became a teacher. Use the same psychology they used with you to help your students. Because the times are different but people are the same. They are asking for help if you would just learn to understand what they are asking at the time. They may say I don't want this and I don't want that. Cool, maybe you will like this. Don't say, if you don't want it, get up and leave. Show them different ideas,different topics, different subjects. See if they would like any of it. They are going to want to understand. If it is just that they want to know about cars... get them books on cars.. read them..teach them how to read back to you and tell you what they have learned about it. If it is being a ditch digger...all this person wants to be interested in.. listen to his ideas. No matter how simple or no matter how dumb they may be..if you will listen to him then he will be more willing to listen to you and your dumb ideas that he thinks are dumb.....I ask you to listen.

On the Value of Education: There's one point about education that a lot of people don't really stress. It's not necessary to get you a good job or the ability to carry on a good conversation, but it's a feeling inside a person of self worth and self gratification . . . a satisfaction about yes I have an education, yes I do know this and yes I can work this problem myself. I don't need you.

On the Roots of Illiteracy: I know just like when I was in school the teacher didn't take time to really show me . . . they really didn't show no real get up about trying to help you do this or help you do that and I was ashamed to ask people different things because I didn't want them to know how dumb I was and I knew they were going to laugh and make fun of me.

References

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